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ABSTRACT

This study examined the career and college advice that high school counselors and vocational teachers gave to students who were unlikely to seek a 4-year college degree. Transcripts of interviews conducted with 35 guidance counselors and 80 vocational teachers from 12 Chicago metropolitan high schools between 1992 and 1995 were examined in regard to the participants' views about the importance of college attendance, the advice the counselors gave to students, and how this advice varied for different students. It was found that counselors did not articulate clear reasons why they steered students to college, what kinds of students they believed should choose college, or for what career goals. The majority considered college as a general panacea for all goals and all individuals. In addition, the majority of counselors were reluctant to confront students who had unrealistic expectations regarding college or job plans. Teachers classified as "diplomats" discussed postsecondary plans with students as subtly as possible, while those classified as "straightforward" expressed much less concern about hurting students' self-esteem and were more direct in assessing students' plans and offering advice. (Contains 14 references.) (MDM)

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"Career and College Advice to the Forgotten Half: What Do Counselors and Vocational Teachers Advise?"

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This paper examines the career and college advice that high school counselors and vocational teachers give to the "Forgotten Half," students who are unlikely to seek a four-year college degree (Grant Commission, 1988). In light of heightened concern about these students, the additional skill needs of the labor force, and the increased availability of community colleges, this issue is of special interest. With no formal instruction on how to advise these youth, most school staff have had to improvise, deciding what advice is most appropriate for these youth who, in past decades, needed little or no special training to get well-paid jobs. Both counselors and vocational teachers have difficulties to overcome when advising workbound youth. Counselors' training around careers has largely been in helping better students apply to college; they have limited training in college and career issues for students who are not planning four-year degrees. Vocational teachers' training has been in providing job-skill training. They have not received training in career-advising, and they have no formal responsibility for advising students' careers.

Complicating the issue is that currently there is no societal consensus on what advice is appropriate. While open admissions has made community college an option for many more students, the limits of this option are suggested by the large number of seniors who lack even ninth-grade achievement skills (NAEP, 1990), the large number of college students taking remedial courses that do not offer college credits, and the large number of college dropouts.

Only about 28% of high school graduates finish four-year college degrees after 14 years, and another 17% get one- or two-year degrees (Digest of Education Statistics, 1995, Table 289). Of those who enroll in a two-year college, only 38.4% have received a degree or certificate within five years, and 48% have no degree and are no longer enrolled (Post-Secondary Longitudinal Survey, 1996, p. 9). Moreover, for students who took two or more remedial courses in their first year, the rates of degree completion are substantially lower. While there are theoretical gains to human capital for each course, empirical analyses suggest little earnings gain to college attendance unless one gets a degree or certificate (Jencks, et al. 1979). Despite our nation's enthusiasm for encouraging all students to attend college, college attendance may not always be the most appropriate choice, especially for students who are poorly prepared for college.

In any case, neither counselors nor vocational teachers have received instruction about how to advise the career and college plans of students who are unlikely to complete college degrees and how to help them prepare for the demands of the current labor market. As noted, both occupations have difficulties in giving advice and have limitations in their expertise, and little is known about what advice they currently give. This study seeks to explore how these two occupational groups approach this issue.

Methods and Data

Using verbatim transcriptions of taped interviews with 35 guidance counselors and 80 vocational teachers for content analysis, we identify general themes and perspectives in the responses of the interview participants regarding their views about the importance of college attendance after high school, the advice they give to students, and how this advice varies for different students. The variety of school settings in our sample allows us to compare the views of urban and suburban vocational teachers as well as the attitudes and advice of those who work in vocational and comprehensive high schools.

We pose models of vocational teacher and counselor advice on the need for college and the kinds of signal they believe are associated with college work. The ways that school staff respond to students with unrealistic college or employment plans are also analyzed, along with the constraints on the kinds of advice that vocational teachers and counselors give.

The teachers and counselors in our sample were drawn from 12 Chicago metropolitan high schools. In face-to-face interviews conducted from 1992 to 1995, respondents were asked to describe their responsibilities, the postsecondary plans of their students, how they recognize that students' plans may be unrealistic, the kinds of advice they give to students regarding college and career plans, and any constraints they face in providing information and advice. In addition, they were asked their opinions about training at community colleges and the advice they give about attending community college. Both groups were also questioned about employment opportunities for youth seeking jobs after high school.

Schools in our sample are evenly split between urban and suburban. Five of our schools have vocationally-oriented curricula; the others are comprehensive schools offering vocational training of varying depths. The schools include 4 majority white suburban schools, 1 mixed race urban school, 5 majority African-American and Latino urban schools, 1 mixed race suburban school, and 1

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predominately African-American suburban school explained his approach this way: "I do try and convince all of them [to attend the 2-year city college]. It would enhance their marketability."

Generally, we found that counselors do not articulate clear reasons why they steer students to college, what kinds of students should choose college, or for what career goals. Nor do they discuss specific courses students should take nor offer information about specific careers for them to consider. This statement from a counselor in an urban vocational school is typical: "I try to encourage them all to go to college, even if it's just a junior college. You know, I always encourage them, because I just feel that you need something more than a high school diploma." Several counselors simply express a "personal bias for education" and stress that students should take "at least one class" at community college "to try it out." In the reports of most counselors, there is no indication that counselors consider the achievements or interests of students as having any influence on their recommendation: all students get the same prescription. College is urged as a general panacea for all goals for all individuals, and no caveats or conditions are stated.

In addition, the majority of our counselors are reluctant to confront students who have unrealistic expectations regarding college or job plans. Even when counselors do not hold the college-for-all perspective themselves, they are often reluctant to confront students who have unrealistic expectations regarding college or job plans. Fearing complaints from parents or administrators, counselors often avoid discouraging unrealistic plans, although some counselors express concerns about not doing so. As a counselor working in a middle-class suburban school said: "I think the biggest problem is the parents. I think there are many counselors that don't want to fight the parents. Instead of saying, 'Yes, that's true, but do you realize college doesn't guarantee a job? . . . [Your child] likes to work with his hands, why not put him into a two-year program and make good money?'" (For a more detailed discussion of counselors' advice on college and the constraints they face, see Rosenbaum, Miller and Krei, 1996.)

We found some exceptions to the college-for-all perspective of the majority of our counselors. Regarding going to work after high school, a counselor told us that her advice "would depend on what they're interested in. Their career interests . . . . [T]here are programs that prepare students, after they have completed two years, to actually get a job where they can make a decent living." She goes on to describe the way in which she tailors her postsecondary advice to individual students' plans. Another counselor working in the same school said, "We just don't think college is for everyone. . . .[Y]ou try to figure out what's best for each individual student because it is not best for everyone. I'm not the judge

include increased maturity that comes from some time spent in college and increased skill levels. As one teacher explained: "I feel [college-trained workers in his field] don't always have better skills than my high school students, but [employers] look for that."

In a few cases, teachers say that they push college attendance but give no explanation for its benefits. For example, one teacher said he encourages students to "take something" at the local community college, even if it is only one class. Others see college as a way to "test the field," as if taking college courses is the best way for young people to decide if they like the occupational area they studied in high school.

2. Diplomats: Treading Softly

The 26 Diplomats talk with students about postsecondary plans "as subtly as possible," as one teacher told us. They are reluctant to tell students that their plans may not be feasible and that college may demand more than they are prepared to deliver. These kinds of concerns were shared by a teacher working in a suburban vocational school: "I don't go around with a pin and burst everybody's balloon. . . .I don't want to discourage [students] because that's not my job. I want to encourage him. So I try to paint everything in a good picture. But a realistic one . . . . A lot of these kids, it's a self-esteem thing. . . .I try to be real careful about that." Another vocational teacher described this careful approach: "I might not directly say you're never going to get this, but I might say, 'Have you thought about what it's going to take to get from where you are to that job. What does it take? What kinds of grades does it take? What kinds of courses does it take.'" These teachers try to balance encouragement with realistic advice: "I try not to discourage them. I say, 'Well, that's not a bad idea, but how about this?' And then what I'll do is say, 'Have you had this class?' or 'Are you pretty good at this?' . . . . I kind of open it up . . . so they say, 'You know, he's probably right. I should probably be doing something else.'"

Diplomats are found across our sample, in every field, but many of them are concentrated in schools located in communities where most students are expected to be collegebound. In blue-collar communities in which parents may see college attendance as a sign of upward mobility, teachers must tread softly on this issue. In middle and upper middle class suburbs, teachers are also careful in offering advice about alternatives to college because they believe the college-for-all attitude to be the norm in their communities. In an effort to deflect responsibility these teachers may suggest that students talk to people they know outside of school to get more information: "I would suggest that they look around a little bit and take stock of where they want to be and what they think it's going to take to get

goes to school. The teacher continues, saying, "I just try to give them a more realistic course for what they're thinking. Otherwise they go through certain [education and training] which won't come off the way you think it's going to."

The Straightforward group express much less concern about hurting self-esteem or about repercussions from parents and administrators, at least in part because they feel confident about their knowledge of their fields and their students' interests and capabilities. As one teacher told us: "I think I'm less concerned with hurting their feelings than I am about wasting a good portion of their life doing something that is a dead end for them."

Teachers working in schools which are predominately African-American often mention that they find a strongly prevailing college-for-all attitude among counselors and administrators. In spite of strong pressure to push college, some of these teachers still emphasize other options. Since these vocational teachers often come from previous jobs in the trades, they know what is required to succeed in skilled trades, and they can often help students with job access.

The Straightforward group uses a variety of approaches to providing information. In their classrooms, this group often includes college and career information as part of their regular curriculum. Some include very explicit career information and job skill requirements as part of their classroom activities. Students may be required to do research and give reports in class about job opportunities in their fields of study. In addition, students are taken to job sites, and employers are invited to speak. The Straightforward teachers also have individual discussions with students about what they want to do, what they can afford, and if they feel prepared for additional academic work.. Teachers describe these talks as very detailed sessions that at the least give students plenty to consider.

When asked if their students tend to have unrealistic college or career plans, the Straightforward group is less likely to respond that their students are unrealistic. They believe that their students have the information necessary to formulate workable postsecondary plans. "I tell them what their qualifications are for what they want to get into, and that if they really want to achieve that goal, there are certain requirements they're going to have to satisfy and if they can't get them here, they'll have to get them at a junior college or wherever they're available." Noting that he rarely sees students who have unrealistic plans, another Straightforward teacher said that "normally I give them the boundaries of what their starting pay is, and it's possible that they will become a journeyman in future years, what this future pay will be. I think they're very much aware of how much money they are going to make." If they do identify students whom they believe to be unrealistic, these teachers

Like counselors, many of the Hands-off have doubts that they are serving students well by failing to provide clear career guidance and explore the feasibility of students' plans. One of the Hands-off teachers in a working-class suburban school told us that the school prides itself on the college-bound status of its students but that actually only about 40% attend college after senior year. He said that the emphasis on college is unfair to kids because it creates false hopes and aspirations. Parents in his school believe that their children have to "go to college to succeed" when a trade school or work program might suit them much better.

Limitations of the Study

Although we have studied diverse high schools and interviewed a large number of vocational teachers and several counselors, the sample is relatively small and may not be generalizable to all high schools. The findings here represent self-reports. These self-presentations may be distorted. We do believe, however, that our interview format, with its many open-ended questions, allows far more detailed and thoughtful responses than those provided by surveys.

This study would be enriched if we knew more about other sources of advice. We cannot speculate about the other ways in which students in the schools we studied obtain career information and postsecondary advice. Help in planning provided by teachers and counselors may be less critical if students are receiving information and guidance elsewhere. However, we suspect that the quality and kind of information and advice given outside of school is highly dependent on one's social class background. Public high schools provide the best chance of equalizing the information available to low-SES students, so the findings of this study have particularly great relevance for the opportunities of these students.

Further research in other regions of the country would also extend the usefulness of our findings. The Chicago metropolitan area, with its large and varied industrial base, may yield results which are different from a similar study conducted in an economically-depressed region, an agricultural area, or a section dependent on more high-tech industries. However, the Chicago area offers a large number of jobs that do not require college, and the newspapers regularly have had stories about the high drop-out rate at the city colleges, so we might expect that these teachers and counselors would be less likely to push college unconditionally than their peers in some other regions.

The Straightforward group offers students information in a number of ways. Like others in our sample, this group is not eager to "burst bubbles" or hurt feelings. On the contrary, they believe that they are less likely to have to share disappointing news because they have provided information to their students all along, as part of their regular curriculum. In addition, this group tends to discuss options with individual students and to offer advice when needed. Students benefit by having knowledge of workplace requirements and postsecondary training opportunities as well as having the advice of adults who are not reluctant to talk with them about formulating realistic plans.

Conclusions

What we must not lose sight of here is that many students who enter college do not attain any degree. For students who are poorly prepared for college, the college-for-all approach may be highly inappropriate, unless these students are warned about the difficulties they will face, and the efforts they must be willing to exert to overcome these difficulties. If these students come from low-income backgrounds and must take on loans and financial deprivations, an easy vague promise that "college can be helpful to anyone's career" is both financially costly and professionally dubious. While we would never say that students should not have the right to a second chance, advice which allows poorly prepared students to think they can breeze through college is a recipe for failure.

This is especially true because other options do exist, but they are not mentioned by most counselors. Many vocational teachers told students about good jobs they could get which would provide training and advancement in skilled jobs paying $30,000/year by age 30. Some vocational teachers knew about apprenticeship programs that led to well-paid careers in construction or trades. Some knew about some firms which would even pay college tuition for job relevant courses in their vocational field, and these courses would qualify a worker for pay increases or promotions (an important exception to the general finding that only credentials have earnings payoffs). Moreover, vocational teachers reported that even students who had disliked school tended to do well in job-relevant courses. These various options are often better choices for students, but college-for-all counselors and teachers did not mention them.

Youth who do poorly in high school need guidance and information to help them make choices regarding employment and further training after high school. Many of these students will look to people in their schools, especially counselors and vocational teachers, as sources of advice. These adults are well placed to help students plan their futures. Yet it is clear that, for a variety of reasons, many

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